DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 111 070 EA 007 438

AUTHOR Bagin, Don
TITLE How To Start and Improve a P. R. Program.
INSTITUTION National School Boards Association, Evanston, Ill.
PUB DATE 75
NOTE 54p.
AVAILABLE FROM National School Boards Association, P. O. Box 1496, Evanston, Illinois 60204 ($5.00, Quantity discounts)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.76 Plus Postage. HC Not Available from EDRS.
DESCRIPTORS *Board of Education Role; *Communication (Thought Transfer); *Community Relations; Elementary Secondary Education; *Information Dissemination; Information Needs; Information Theory; Interschool Communication; Mass Media; *Public Relations; School Community Relationship

ABSTRACT

This is a primer designed to help the school management team communicate better. It offers guidelines and ideas for establishing and improving public relations efforts. Chapters cover such subjects as what public relations can do for schools, how to start a public relations program, and the public relations roles of school officials, as well as the specifics of getting the job done, working with the community, getting the most from the media and publications, developing public relations strategies for board meetings, and planning and evaluating public relations efforts. The final section is a "yellow pages" that presents other sources of information on the subject. (IRT)

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HOW TO START AND IMPROVE A P.R. PROGRAM

by Don Bagin

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Don E. Blom, Assistant Executive Director
for Administration and Membership Services
Lee VanBremen, Membership Services Director

HOW TO START AND IMPROVE A PR PROGRAM
is an original publication developed for the National School Boards Association by Don Bagin, Professor of Communications, Glassboro State College, N.J.

Price: Single Copy, $5.00. Discounts on quantity orders: 10-49 copies, 10%; 50-99 copies, 15%; 100 or more copies, 20%. Shipping and handling charges will be added to billed orders.

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FOREWORD

School board members and school administrators are facing increased challenges from concerned citizens who are demanding to know what is going on in their schools. In some states, legislatures have mandated an increasing degree of citizen involvement in the schools. Whatever the various causes for the public's increased desire to be informed about its schools, the net result is a need for better communication between the schools and the public to ensure continued support for effective public school systems governed by local citizen boards of education.

The National School Boards Association has made a major commitment this year to increase public awareness of and support for local boards of education. This booklet supports that effort. It is designed as a primer to help the school management team communicate better and offers guidelines and ideas for establishing and improving public relations efforts.

It is our hope that the suggestions made in this booklet will enable school officials to win more public support to operate their schools more effectively.

Harold V. Webb
Executive Director

HOW TO START AND IMPROVE A PR PROGRAM

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PR: WHAT IT CAN DO FOR SCHOOLS

What Is School Public Relations?

School public relations is a planned and systematic two-way process of communications between a school system and its "internal" and "external" publics. An effective public relations program effects a feeling of "they're our schools and we're working together to make them better."

School public relations is a vital component of the management efforts of the schools. It is the responsibility of every school official – elected, appointed or hired – to communicate effectively and to encourage all employees to communicate as best they know how.

School public relations can be a series of news releases. Or it can be a secretary who answers the telephone pleasantly and helps the caller find the right person to answer a question. It can be an informative newsletter. Or a custodian who assists a visitor seeking a certain office.

It can be a coffee klatsch with the superintendent and a few neighbors, or it can be a teacher who sends home a note telling of a student's positive accomplishment in class.

It can be a school board member sharing the rationale for a decision with people who seek leadership and explanations. It can be setting up a network of key communicators to squelch rumors, or it can be a booklet prepared for parents to help them teach their children how to read. Or a campaign to cut vandalism costs through better communication.

School public relations can be anything that helps people better understand the schools and the schools better understand people in the community. School public relations, in a nutshell, is good solid communication designed to help more people learn better.

What School Communications Isn't

Often well-intentioned school board members and school administrators can doom a public relations effort before it's under way. This is frequently because they don't fully understand what communications can accomplish for a school district.

Too often school officials want to start some semblance of a public relations program for one of the following reasons:

- *"Because many similar districts have one."* (This approach makes little sense for initiating any change in the schools.)
- *"Because we want to make ourselves look good in the press."* (Of course no one admits this publicly, but many school public relations consultants have frankly been given this rationale.)
- *"Because it will solve our problems and we won't have any more complaints about the way we're running the schools."* (This optimistic attitude won't hold up under the everyday pressures of school business. A sound communications program will do many good things but it will not be a panacea, curing the ills of the district.)

• *"Because we want to run a winning campaign for a needed new high school."* (If running a campaign includes the kind of year-round, honest effort noted elsewhere, fine; if it means merely a one-month concentrated campaign to win sudden friends for the schools, it probably won't work.)

The kind of school communications efforts that pay legitimate dividends in increased public understanding and confidence can't be based on any of the aforementioned reasons for starting a program.

School communications is not something that will permit covering up bad curricular efforts. Nor will better communications efforts prompt diligent reporters to ignore problems in the schools.

In fact, attempts to substitute public relations of a less-than-honest nature for real efforts to improve poor learning conditions will backfire – as they should. People will interpret such attempts as dishonest, and any such impression in this era must result in an increased loss of confidence in school officials.

If a public relations undertaking does not seek better public understanding and support of the schools through honest attempts at communication, little justification can be made for the effort.

Who Is Served by a Communications Program?

If a communications program is properly implemented, very nearly everybody in a school district benefits.

Students benefit. Board members benefit. So do administrators. And teachers and other employees. And parents and other taxpayers. How?

When people are communicating, there's always the opportunity to solve problems and improve learning situations. When they're not, people base decisions and attitudes on misinformation and personal dislikes for ideas and people. Illustrating this situation, a comic strip showed a fly harrassing a horse in the first panel. The horse, in the second panel, tried to kill the fly with its tail. In the third panel, the fly flew up to the horse's ear and said, "Hi, horse, my name's Homer." In the final panel, the horse's tail subsided as the horse said, "It's hard to hurt someone you know on a first-name basis."

Perhaps not everyone who gets to know school officials because of a better communications effort will agree with all of those officials' ideas. But research and experiences of many school officials clearly indicate that people are less hostile in their dealings with the schools when communications channels have been opened.

Thus, school board members benefit from better communication because taxpayers are getting information about the schools and because a spirit exists that the schools do indeed belong to the public. Board members also benefit because the schools are operating with fewer crises when administrators are communicating better. Administrators benefit because they spend less time putting out crisis fires and because teachers are communicating more effectively with parents. And parents are happy because they are provided with compelling evidence that people at the school care about their children.

Simply starting a communications program will not make everybody happy with the schools' efforts all of the time. Properly implemented, the program should please more of the people more of the time.

If a school district is to communicate with the proper audiences, one of its first efforts at communications should be to identify its various internal and external audiences. Knowing these audiences and their distinctions will help overcome the tendency that some school officials have to lump all the publics together in a one-way, one-audience information campaign.

Once a school district has pinpointed the audiences to be served, it should then determine the kinds of information and input each audience needs. With this base of knowledge available, the communications program can advance with assurances that an orderly approach is being developed, and that as many people as possible are being served by the program.

Case Studies

Case One: Without a Communications Network

More than 1200 people in a suburban community signed a petition presented by 10 angry taxpayers to the superintendent of schools. The taxpayers brought TV camera crews and reporters with them, assuring maximum media attention.

The reason for their concern? Rumors that the school district was planning to bus some students from their affluent suburb to a nearby urban ghetto district.

School administrators were caught completely by surprise, especially since no such plans were under consideration. A brief discussion of the topic had occupied part of an administrative cabinet meeting, but the possibility of such a move had been dismissed.

Although the superintendent denied any plans to bus students, the petition had stirred the community, causing people to become upset over how they perceived the schools to be run. Credibility of the administration had been questioned. Why would all those people sign such a petition if there weren't some truth to the charge? That question lingered in the community.

This incident impeded other kinds of progress in the district until a sound communications network was established to build a foundation of openness and believability.

Case Two: With a Communications Network

A black student and a white student in a junior high school fought in the school building during the school day. The black student was suspended; the white student wasn't. The community's population was evenly split between blacks and whites.

Given only that much information, one could safely assume that severe problems might have erupted in the community because of this apparently unfair treatment. But no problems arose. Why?

Because the school's principal previously had developed an inexpensive means of communicating that afforded the luxury of almost instantaneous dissemination of information both in the school and in the community.

Tapping the key communicators (people who talk to and are believed by large numbers of people), he quickly communicated the facts of the incident. The black student had been involved in two previous similar fights; he and his parents had been warned that one more fight would result in suspension. The fight was the first for the other student.

By communicating these facts to his key internal communicators (about 12 students, teachers and other staff members who spread the word before school was dismissed), and to approximately 25 community members, the principal averted a problem that could have been caused by misinformation.

Case Three: With a Communication Network

A sixth grade girl was knocked down at lunch and complained to the school nurse of a severe pain in the shoulder. The nurse told her she was OK and that she should report to her class. She did, but still experienced pain and complained of it to the teacher. The teacher told her she was OK if the nurse said she was, and ordered the girl to remain in class.

When the student returned home, her mother took her to the doctor, who informed them that the girl had broken her shoulder.

Understandably, the parents were upset about the nurse's error, angry at the teacher's lack of action, and most importantly they were enraged at what they felt was a lack of discipline at lunch. The mother started to prepare placards urging people to vote against the school budget, which was to be decided upon during the following week. She was not opposed to the budget on financial or educational grounds. This was her way of demonstrating her displeasure with the discipline situation at lunch.

Before she was very far into the anti-budget campaign (no public involvement had ensued as yet), the mother was visited by a neighbor who was serving as a key communicator for the school district. He suggested she bring the problem to the attention of the appropriate school authroities. A meeting was hastily arranged, some changes were made regarding lunch assignments, discipline improved, and the placards were thrown away – never to be used.

The budget passed and the school administrators who had developed the key communicator network averted a crisis. (See section on "getting feedback" for an explanation of the key communicator process on pages 31-32.)

National Trends in School Public Relations

It can be helpful for school leaders to know what's going on in other parts of the country in the field of school communications. The idea is to identify trends that are developed elsewhere and are likely to influence the local situation at an early date. The astute school official recognizes trends and anticipates how their movement might affect local schools.

Here are some current national trends:

• The term "public relations" gradually is being replaced by the word "communications." The implication here is that those who prefer "public relations" had better be prepared for opposition simply because of the image that public relations has acquired however unjustifiably. Communications and community-

relations are purer-sounding and usually gain more public acceptance than does public relations.

• More community involvement in the schools is being mandated by state legislatures. California requires public involvement in goal-setting for the schools. Florida demands a citizens advisory committee for each school district and an annual report for each school. Legislators in other states are championing the cause of "bringing the public schools back to the public" – certainly a suggestion that is likely to gain public support.

Many school districts consequently are initiating programs to involve the public in ways that will help the school but will not create bases for people who wish to develop a "super-board of education" status to wrest control from the duly elected or appointed board. The school district that intelligently establishes community involvement techniques takes a giant step toward effective communications.

• More and more emphasis is being placed on two-way communications. For many years many school officials equated public relations efforts with news releases and newsletters. Today, many schools emphasize the need to obtain information *from* audiences so a data base may be built to enable decision makers to determine what to communicate to which audience.

• Increased emphasis is being placed on internal communications. As pointed out in the Gallup polls on education, people who get their information about schools from school board members and school employees are more favorably disposed toward the schools than are people who acquire their information from other sources. People expect employees to know what's going on where they work. Students are looked to for first-hand information. Numerous studies of employee morale indicate that a recurring employee concern is that the employee know what's going on at the place of employment. Many leaders in the field of school communications suggest that a solid communications network must be built on a firm base of good internal communications.

• More time is being spent *anticipating* problems (and thereby averting crises) as communications specialists seem to be gaining more respect from the management team of which they are becoming full-fledged members. Previously the "PR person" was regarded as a news release writer and a newsletter preparer.

• Public relations problems are being prompted by legal decisions and the recognition of rights by students and parents. The right of parents to information in student files and various state policies on student rights are two such areas. The implication is for better cooperation among the superintendent, the school board attorney, and the person responsible for communications.

• More people trained in the field of school communications are providing help for other employees in this area. This means that communications specialists and administrators with a sound background in communications are conducting inservice sessions for other employees to help them improve their public relations efforts.

• A body of knowledge is being developed in the field of school communications. This is enabling school officials to base communications

pants" feelings.

- More attention is being given to results in the schools in this age of accountability. This requires schools to provide additional information to the public regarding the effectiveness of programs. Statewide assessment requirements often mandate making results public, thereby tapping the expertise of someone skilled in communications.

- More schools are recognizing a need to appoint someone to handle the responsibility for the district's communications efforts. Some are appointing persons on a part-time basis or combining the public relations responsibility with another task, such as personnel, adult education or grant writing.

How Can We Tell If Our PR Efforts Need Improving?

The easiest, although seldom used, way to find out if a school system's communications efforts need improving is to ask the people who have an interest in the schools. This means school board members, administrators, teachers and other staff members, students, parents, and other taxpayers.

Asking them, by using formal feedback techniques such as surveys and advisory groups, enables school officials to determine what people want to know and how they would like the information to get to them. Such techniques also will provide educational leaders with information that leads to setting up a solid two-way communications system that will serve the schools and their publics well.

Some obvious indicators of a need for communications improvement are: a lack of understanding of school finance proposals; constant public criticism based on misinformation; media criticism of school board meetings that seem to be hiding public information; major unfavorable reaction to innovations (if the reaction is based on a lack of information); rumors spreading throughout the community without any school reaction or communications network to dispel false information.

Report cards that aren't understood and memorandums from administrators that are legally proper but are written in language that neither parents nor many others can comprehend contribute to a need for communications improvement.

Staff members who complain that they don't know what's going on where they work and students who don't know how to make suggestions for improvement in the schools because communications channels aren't clear – these comprise two more reasons for improving communications.

If the board and administration consistently are surprised by public reactions at board meetings, the two-way communications network isn't working. If 400 people sign a petition protesting some alleged school plan and school officials don't know about it until the petition is presented at a board meeting, something needs improving in the two-way network. (Suggestions for accomplishing this are presented in another section.)

Three useful sources to help school officials determine what kind of a job they are doing now are the National School Public Relations Association's *Evaluation Instrument for Educational Public Relations Programs,* the New York City school district's publication, *What's Your PRQ?,* and the Alhambra, Calif., schools' *PR Quiz for Principals.*

HOW TO START A PR PROGRAM

The Importance of a Written Policy

A school board that must get along without written policy to guide its actions is inviting a list of ills beginning with inconsistent activity and usually ending with bickering and a frantic shout for a legal lifesaver. This is especially true when it comes to public relations, where decisions can directly and all too easily alienate large numbers of concerned people.

Perhaps the most disruptive consequence of a lack of public relations policy is the division such a lack fosters among school board members. Whether board members were elected or appointed, they must feel that they have some influence and rapport with at least some segments of the community. If every board member feels empowered to make particular public relations decisions based on personal opinion or personal motivation, chaos often results. A potpourri of inconsistency becomes the style of operation as constituents lose confidence in the fairness of the board.

A public relations policy supplies guidelines and objectives for communications efforts. It should eliminate useless wrangling over which newspaper should be favored or which achievements should receive publicity or which buildings can be used by which groups. A policy is the best device to eliminate spinning wheels, expensive inactivity and do-nothing publicity.

A well-developed policy will have ready and reasonable answers for community pressure groups. A well-planned policy will often continue to serve the incumbent board and future boards, guaranteeing the children and the community a program that is not dependent on political or personal whims. A policy that reflects community attitudes and aspirations for its schools establishes the "why" for a communications program. It makes the administration's implementation of policy easier and less challenging, and it enables the board to measure results with relative ease.

The adoption of a board policy should be an early step in the development of a solid communications effort. It could be intelligently preceded by a survey of the community and staff to determine communications needs. But before any specific program action is taken, a policy should be formulated.

Under the law, the board of education holds the authority to do what is necessary to govern and manage the public schools. The board writes policy to implement educational goals to fulfill legal requirements, to anticipate and try to forestall problems, and to answer local needs.

Getting PR Policy Help from NSBA

For the school district looking to improve its policy portfolio, the National School Boards Association (NSBA) offers important assistance. Whether a district is starting from scratch or seeking to update existing policies, NSBA can help. Supported by more than 1500 local school districts and other educational agencies throughout the United States, the Educational Policies Service of the National School Boards Association (EPS/NSBA)* functions as a membership cooperative. A professional staff, working from the office of the EPS/NSBA Policy Information Clearinghouse, provides information, ideas and reference

*A subscription service; Direct Affiliates are entitled to a discount rate.

help on a range of topics relating to the development of school board policies and administrative rules.

In the area of school public relations, EPS/NSBA offers a wide array of sample and model policies to help school districts construct guidelines suited to their own communities. NSBA's repertoire includes: *Policies That Support Better School Public Relations; Policies for Better Advisory Committees; Information Campaigns; School-Sponsored Information* (Code of Ethics); *Sports and Special Events Coverage; Public Information Program* (And Evaluation); *News Releases; Public's Right To Know; Board/Community Relations; Community Involvement in Decision Making; Public Hearings; Public Participation in Board Meetings* and others.

School boards should develop policies that suit the needs of their communities. But needless effort in reinventing some basic policy statements can be avoided by referring to existing models. These models have the additional advantage of being rooted in the experience of many school districts across the nation.

Here are three sample public relations policies as offered in NSBA's *Policies That Support Better School Public Relations:*

Public Relations Goals and Objectives

The Board of Education, in an effort to ensure and enhance the possibilities for excellence in the education of our children in a free society, presents and endorses this statement of policy on school and community relations because of its conviction that (a) the public schools belong in every sense to the people who created them by consent, and support them by taxation; (b) the schools are only as strong as the intelligent and informed support of the people of the community, and never any stronger; and (c) the support of the people must be based upon their knowledge of, their understanding about, and their participation in the aims and efforts of the public schools.

The Board therefore reaffirms and declares its design and intent

- to keep the citizens of the district regularly and thoroughly informed through all the channels of communication on all the policies, programs, problems, and planning of the school system, and to carry out this policy through its own efforts and the offices of the superintendent of schools and the director of school-community relations
- to invite the advice and counsel of the people of the school district at all times and especially at all monthly meetings of the Board, except at executive sessions
- and to solicit the sound thinking and studied counsels of the people through advisory committees selected from the community and appointed by this Board to consider those problems which vitally affect the future of our children.

SOURCE: Port Huron Area School District, Port Huron, Mich.

Public Information Program

Since public education is a function initiated by, intended for and financed

largely by citizens of the district, they are entitled to be kept informed of the progress and problems faced by their educational institution. Good communications between the school system and its citizens is crucial for the development of wholesome mutual understanding, respect, and confidence; further, all persons directly associated with the system have the responsibility for developing desirable respect and understanding.

Communications is a two-way process – disseminating and receiving. Citizens are urged to bring their aspirations and feelings about their public schools to the attention of the body which they have chosen to represent them in the management of the institution.

While a number of channels are available for this two-way communication, the Chardon Board of Education sees its chief administrator as the most practical medium for disseminating and receiving information about the schools.

SOURCE: Board of Education, Chardon, Ohio

Communication Between The Schools and The Public

Whereas, By law and tradition, all aspects of a public school system's operations are of public interest and concern, and the Board of Education welcomes and encourages the active participation of citizens in planning for the highest excellence of their public schools; *and*

Whereas, The community must have full access to information if its involvement in the schools is to be effective, responsible and useful; *and*

Whereas, Full disclosure of information must undergird all the activities now carried on by the Board of Education and the staff to effect cooperation between the schools and the communities they serve; *and*

Whereas, Local school boards, which are the main liaison between the Board of Education and the local communities, parent and parent-teacher associations and other citizens, must be properly informed if their essential assistance in seeking continued improvement of the schools is to be achieved; *and*

Whereas, The effectiveness of programs, experiments and demonstrations are a matter of concern to the whole professional staff, and to the parents and citizens of the city; *and*

Whereas, Effective communication between the school system and the public includes also the receipt and consideration of community attitudes, reactions and proposals; *be it, therefore*

Resolved, That the Board of Education adopts the following policy with regard to communication between the schools and the public, for continued implementation by the Superintendent of Schools and his staff in schools, districts and central offices:

1. The school system – central headquarters, district offices and schools – will inform local school boards, parent and parent-teacher associations, and the general public, about the administration and operation of the schools frankly and completely, by every possible medium.

2. All reports of evaluations of experimental, demonstration and on-going programs in the school system will be submitted by the Superintendent of Schools to the Board of Education and are to be made public immediately after the Superintendent and the Board have had an opportunity to read and discuss them. All new programs, demonstrations and experiments are to have evaluation procedures built into them prior to adoption by the Board of Education.

3. Results of standardized tests of pupil achievement and other pertinent measures of performance will be made available to local school boards, parent and parent-teacher associations, and the general public.

4. The school system will use every possible means to ascertain public attitudes and invite constructive suggestions about all phases of its operation for consideration in the planning of policies and procedures.

5. Every employee of the school system has a role in the improvement of communication between the schools and the public. The Superintendent of Schools will develop a comprehensive and continuing program of inservice training in school-community relations for the professional and administrative staffs of schools, districts and central offices.

SOURCE: City of New York Board of Education, New York, N.Y.

Communicating the Policy and Its Implications to Internal and External Audiences

The job of communicating new policies on public relations is made easier if both the internal and external audiences affected by policy are involved in its construction. Internal audiences with an interest in the implications of the new policy include the administrative staff, the professional staff, the paraprofessional staffs, support personnel, volunteer groups and students. External groups might include the citizens advisory group that consulted on the policy writing project, representatives of the media, the public at large, and influential community groups.

Inservice workshops are the best vehicles for communicating the new policy to internal groups. These sessions should include a pointed presentation of the goals of the new policy supported by examples of the strategies that will be used. All of the groups will need to see how the new policy will benefit students and effect the smooth functioning of the schools. Through it all, the support of the board for the program must be clear to all. Follow-up reminders and examples of the policy in practice can be sent to all the groups.

An administrator versed in communications practices should be charged with getting the word out on the new policy. Student journalists and student government representatives can assist with the student groups. The local teacher union/association should welcome the new policy as an

organized vehicle to spread the word about the good things that are occurring in the school.

Particular external groups are best handled by a mixed committee of board and administration officials at group presentations. The public at large will have to be informed through newsletters, news releases and other media vehicles. If a citizens committee worked with the board to help construct the policy, it can be a valuable ally in helping the board win public acceptance for the new policy.

A special presentation or report at a public board meeting by the chairperson of the citizens group might be an appropriate way to announce a policy of this importance. Representatives of the local media should be on hand to report the proceedings. The board should not miss the opportunity to explain to external audiences that the new policy will work for the benefit of the children. The announcement of the policy ought to be coupled with the notion that policy stands for a cooperative attitude on the part of the board to share with the community the responsibility for the progress of its schools.

Job Descriptions and Relationships with Other Members of the Management Team

The communications director's job description should reflect the goals of the communications policy. But the communications policy, like other aspects of the board's policy portfolio, should not be viewed in isolation. All board employees, hired to implement the board's policies, are related in some way on the organizational chart of the management team.

Specific duties of the communications director should be expressed as strategies or jobs to be done to accomplish the board's goals. If the person responsible for carrying out the communications policy is to be most effective, his or her accessibility to the superintendent is essential. This usually is effected best when the public relations person reports directly to the superintendent.

This ought not be inferred to mean that the communications specialist should hold any particular title, salary or status that implies superiority in any way to other administrators. It does recognize the importance of instant access to avoid crises caused by inaction when time pressures are paramount. Inasmuch as the superintendent is ultimately responsible for problems caused by poor communication and since improved communication is a goal of the board, the sage superintendent will foster "a constant availability" relationship with the communications director. The properly chosen person will seldom have to interrupt other business of the superintendent to prompt a needed immediate decision but on those few occasions when such action is required, crises might be averted.

The direct relationship between the superintendent and the communications specialist should not be kept a secret. Making it known enables the communications job to get done better because employees will appreciate the importance the board and superintendent have accorded the position.

It is just as important that all employees and the public relations person recognize that the position carries no line authority. It is a staff position that services other employees. In most states it requires no certification and people chosen for the responsibility seldom covet other administrative positions. These facts, nevertheless, must be communicated to other administrators who might be reluctant to cooperate with the new person.

The title given the public relations specialist can be important. "Coordinator," for example, implies that someone is working with others. "Director" connotes that someone is telling others what to do. Yet, traditionally, director has been used for positions of importance. Does using coordinator lessen the implied importance of the role to be played? Only you can determine which, if either, is better for your circumstances. Some schools opt for "administrative assistant for community relations," a generally accepted title. Most avoid "public relations" in the title, preferring to use communications or community relations. "Information services," used by some schools, implies a limited function and seems to exclude any kind of community involvement. "Publications director" also limits the role.

If the appropriate title is chosen and the role of the person is explained, other members of the management team will regard the communications professional as a person hired to help the total school effort. Possessing certain specific skills, the communications person fulfills an important component of all businesslike enterprises – information flow and the smooth functioning of all branches of the school undertaking through effective communication.

To effect the communication desired, the public relations person's job description must be specific and oriented toward achieving certain objectives. Few things are less effective than vague mandates "to improve communications" or "to rehabilitate our image." The responsibilities should be in a written job description to ensure accountability. The relationship to other staff members and the person's immediate superior should be clearly communicated in this description.

Six general areas of responsibility should be included: research, counsel, planning, coordination, communication and evaluation. Specific responsibilities might include: establishing media relations, providing inservice public relations help for staff, preparing news releases and publications, leading school finance election campaigns, conducting community surveys, running a speakers' bureau, writing speeches and reports, working with advisory committees, establishing board meeting environment, and gaining feedback from the community to provide input to the management team.

The National School Boards Association offers a two-volume reference manual containing some 200 job descriptions, some of which deal with public relations. Useful for any size district, this manual is coupled with a handbook that explains how to adapt sample job descriptions for local use. It is available from the NSBA Educational Policies Service (EPS/NSBA).

Surveying the Public and Staff to Identify Communications Needs

Finding out what the school's community and staff think about communications needs is a sound prerequisite to starting or upgrading a communications program.

Involving both the internal and external publics in identifying needs usually results in better support for expanding public relations efforts. So does pointing out successes. The pulse of these publics can be taken in many ways. As noted elsewhere, a special committee can be formed to study communications needs. Or inservice programs can focus on small group identification of communications challenges and needs in the schools. Questionnaires can be used to survey employees to gain an understanding of their communications needs.

The community also can be surveyed to determine views regarding the schools and to find out how the community itself perceives its communications needs. Having this kind of data base enables the board and superintendent to work with facts when they begin to allocate resources to the task of improving communications.

Surveys should elicit the following kinds of information: where people get their information about the schools; where they would like to get such information; topics people would like more information about; whether they know how to get answers to questions about the schools; whether they feel school employees go out of their way to supply answers; their understanding of innovations in the schools; their willingness to support the schools; how comfortable they feel about dealing with school staff.

Of course, many other topics can be considered. But collecting this kind of information can help the person responsible for communications to provide your publics with the information they want in the most desired form possible. Many study committees have conducted such surveys as part of an indepth look at communications in their school districts.

Announcing the results can set the stage for the beginning or strengthening of a communications program.

Having a Citizens Committee Look at Communications

One of the best ways to start a public relations program is to establish a citizens committee to study your district's communications needs and efforts. Such a committee generally finds that many communications needs are unmet because communications responsibilities are being displaced by other priorities determined by school officials – generally, what public relations efforts do exist are found to be suffering from a lack of personnel or of commitment or of money or of all three. It's the committee's task to make recommendations to improve communications, and if improvement is to be effected, a planned program directed by an administrator with some communications background is going to be required.

When such a recommendation is offered by a committee of laymen, the way usually is paved for community acceptance. In any event, the approach generally meets with appreciably more public favor than does the establishment of a public relations position or emphasis by means of board fiat.

Membership on the committee studying communications needs deserves careful consideration. The recommendations of the group will be only as believable as the credibility of the committee's members. You know which people in the community prompt the community to think and to move. You know which groups appear in the forefront when community improvements are attempted. Be sure to include people from these kinds of groups on the committee.

Try also to include people who are critical of the district's communications. They may turn out to be your staunchest defenders if other critics attack the committee's recommendations. Include students, teachers and other staff members on the committee – you'll need them to identify internal communications needs.

Committee members should determine what people want to know about their schools. They should determine how people get their information about schools, and how people would *prefer* to get that information. They should evaluate sources already available and determine how they might be improved.

The committee may determine that nothing less than a formal survey will provide answers to important communications questions. It might elect to examine similar studies conducted by similar committees in other communities. One of the most thorough studies was completed a number of years ago by the Montgomery County, Maryland, schools in Rockville.

When the committee has completed its study, the chairperson should report the group's findings and recommendations to the school board. This report should be presented at a public board meeting, thereby allowing the board to thank committee members and setting the stage for action on the recommendations. It would be a public relations disaster to fail to respond publicly and in some effective way to the report inasmuch as there was appreciable public involvement in the study.

Mistakes Often Made When Trying to Start a PR Program

Many school districts have tried many ways to start public relations programs. Some of the attempts have merely failed. Others have backfired so explosively that all possibility of doing the job right was negated for years.

Here are ways that didn't work for some districts (remember, though, that as community characteristics differ, so does the degree of failure; what may turn out to be a disappointment in one community may comprise a disaster in another.):

- Appointing an English teacher with no preparation in the field of public relations to the PR position. (The person frequently does little more than prepare wordy, unjournalistic news releases that open your district to ridicule from media representatives.)

- Selecting a friend or relative of a board member for the post. (This action often causes immediate mistrust – not only regarding the appointment but regarding the very need for the position. Was it established to give someone a job or was it *needed?* Even if the person is well-qualified, the aforementioned veil of doubt renders community acceptance of the new position difficult to attain.)

- Transferring someone who is not succeeding in one post to the newly created public relations position. (This foolish move caused the position in one district to be abolished after a year because very little was accomplished by the person who had previously accomplished very little as a principal; the individual was to retire in two years, and the management team thought it was being compassionate in finding something for him to do.)

- Naming a teacher to the post on a part-time basis. (This used to work for some districts and may still work in a few small ones, but the management-labor division in today's schools has made it almost impossible for a teacher to handle this position on any basis; at bargaining time [and strike time] which side of the argument can the teacher be expected to represent?

- Suddenly placing a line item position for public relations in the budget. (This ill-planned method usually does not survive beyond the first public discussion of the budget; sometimes it appears as if the district's management team has inserted the item as a sacrificial lamb to be thrown to taxpayers looking for ways to reduce the budget.)

- Combining the public relations responsibility with another key job or two and not informing the person handling the responsibility about the importance of public relations and the goals to be set and reached. (When public relations becomes a stepchild to other responsibilities, expect little to be accomplished, except for accusations that communications problems still exist – even now that "we have a PR person.")

- Regarding the newly appointed communications specialist as little more than a writer of news releases. (This will do little to allow the person to help anticipate and avoid crises for the management team; it will ensure that media representatives ignore or bypass the communications person because they know that this person is not close to the district's decision-making apparatus.)

- Starting a program without defined objectives. (Too often a communications program is initiated because a few board members and the superintendent think it's a good idea, and the person appointed to the post seems interested and knowledgeable; but unless definitive goals are established, the person, in spite of hard work, could fail utterly to meet the needs determined by the management people who created the position.)

PR ROLES OF SCHOOL OFFICIALS

The Board Member's Role

The school board member plays a key role in establishing and maintaining a communications program that works. In an age of increasing concern about local control of schools, the decisions of school board members are being scrutinized more and more. This means that efforts to communicate must be explained clearly, and policies to effect those efforts must be thoroughly considered before adoption.

Leadership necessary to make communications a priority item usually comes from the management team. Superintendents, like other employees, look to their employers to determine which priorities loom important. Sage superintendents will establish priorities for themselves and their staffs that will closely coincide with the policies and wishes of school board members. Thus, it's imperative that board members who expect effective communications to take place communicate that desire to the superintendent.

Frequently administrators, faced with numerous responsibilities, react negatively to the board's suggestion that another area of the school administrative effort – communications – be given priority. "But we have only so many hours in a day," some administrators will argue.

An easy way to counter this argument is to tell the superintendent that communications is to be given priority to the exclusion of some other responsibilities. As one board member puts it: "Move communications from 73rd on the list to somewhere in the top five, and move the others down."

This kind of direction is needed if any movement is to be expected from any school administrators. Few administrators feel comfortable about their ability to communicate. Numerous studies have indicated that most administrators would like additional courses in the areas of human relations and public relations. When people lack confidence in their ability in a specific area, they quite naturally put that job on the bottom of the pile. Therefore, communications attempts are often saved for Friday afternoons – if no emergencies occur.

Only when the board and the superintendent communicate to principals and other administrators that communications successes and failures will be part of the annual evaluation of the administrator will the intent to communicate be taken as seriously as its advocates wish.

In addition to providing impetus for communications movement in the district's administrative efforts, board members can contribute immensely to community understanding simply by talking to people about schools. Numerous studies show that people accept information about schools when it comes from board members and school employees more than they do from other sources. Consequently, board members can do much to effect public understanding and support of the schools.

The tone of school board meetings also helps establish a spirit for community acceptance of ideas and decisions advanced by the schools. The board member who speaks as if the entire district had little right to challenge any statement or who mumbles in an inconsiderate way only serves to alienate the very people whose support would help the schools. It is easy to understand why board

members might not want to take the time to explain a new policy pleasantly, especially when so many hours are demanded by board meetings. Yet that little extra effort on the part of a board member to put himself or herself in the place of a critic or a sincere questioner will reap large dividends for the schools.

School board members usually receive complaints from friends, neighbors and other voters about the way something allegedly was mishandled by some school employee. Frequently the major crisis, in the eyes of the wronged parent, was caused by some basic failure in communication. Management team telephone calls made without caller identification serve to check on the kind of service and attitude employees are providing.

Here is a certainty: The communications effort will be only as good as board members dictate.

The Administrator's Role

No matter what the policy and job descriptions say, the communications thrust will be only as good as the school administrators determine it must be. And the person who usually decides the extent of the efforts is the superintendent. Therefore, the school board and superintendent must agree on the importance of the public relations undertakings for the district. If the top administrator does little more than pay lip service to communications, other administrators will readily recognize this and devote their time to other pursuits.

For communications to swing into high gear, the superintendent must demonstrate overtly the importance being placed on this need. This can be done many ways: by placing specific communications evaluation questions on an annual evaluation form for administrators; by spending some time at every administrative cabinet meeting on public relations; by selecting communications as the year-long topic for inservice; by lauding specific communications efforts of some administrators; and by pointing out how better communications might have prevented some embarrassing crises.

Administrators must see the value of communicating better before they will change their operating procedures. This can be done easily in inservice programs that help principals and others identify communications needs and show them how to meet those needs.

Some principals, for instance, must be shown how and where sound public relations ideas have worked. When other principals relate success stories based on their communications efforts, the ideas spread and are generally adopted as soon as principals feel comfortable about their ability to implement them. And few people have greater opportunities to communicate with diverse audiences than do principals. Principals, in one day, can exert direct impact on the attitudes of students, teachers, other employees, parents and other taxpayers.

Principals can foster a spirit of "we're working together to make this a better school," or they can destroy student and staff morale by communicating the coldness of a totally disinterested bureaucrat busily completing forms in the safety of a closed-door office.

Most teachers, when rating principals, give high grades to those who are accessible and who communicate a concern for teacher needs. This kind of concern can spill over to other employees – who then communicate that certain

air of caring to students. And that's one of the goals of communications efforts: to improve learning through better morale prompted by better communication.

Here is one example of the major role played by the principal: A number of first-year teachers approached the principal and asked for some kind of help to prepare for parent conferences and back-to-school night. Like most new teachers, they lacked confidence in their ability to handle questions and to communicate effectively with parents. They had received no preparation in college for these responsibilities. The principal's response: "Don't worry about it; the parents are less confident than you are." Such was the extent of the assistance provided by that principal.

The teachers consequently presented less than their best in their first meetings with parents, thus weakening one of the vital communications links of the school system.

A principal who realizes the need for leadership in public relations will provide inservice help for the staff to improve communications techniques and foster employee confidence in communications abilities. But principals first must feel confident in their own public relations knowledge and abilities.

Administrators must realize that they represent the schools at all times. Administrators can't walk away from the school building and be divested of the label that announces that a school leader is present in a group. Administrators who are active in the community's service organizations can contribute immeasurably to the understanding of the schools' challenges and achievements. Inasmuch as many community leaders belong to such groups, administrators can quietly build confidence in the schools and bring back citizen questions and concerns about the schools to the administrative team.

Hiring Administrators Who Can Communicate

In the long run, efforts to improve school communications must focus on hiring administrators who possess the attitude and ability necessary to get the job done. The person or committee involved in hiring should look for an administrator who understands people and who can work well with the divergent groups that make up a school and its community. Seek administrators who understand the power of public opinion and what kind of information the schools should make available to the public.

The school district should make clear to candidates what the district's commitment to communicating is and what the school system will expect from them if they are hired. Recent research indicates that school board members are placing increasing importance on the need to hire administrators who can communicate effectively.

A mistake that some board members and administrators make is to assume that a candidate who has completed a course in school public relations automatically has become expert in that area. Sorry to say, this often is untrue. Many professors teaching the course lack experience in the field and are not knowledgeable about the topic; therefore, people taking the course get little more than three graduate credits out of it. Other candidates for administrative positions may have completed a course with a top professor in the field but may simply be burdened with the kind of personality that interferes with getting along with people.

Some school districts find that the reactions of applicants to hypothetical (or real) situations demonstrates the applicants' attitude toward working with the public and specific skills in this area. Each school system has its own set of communications challenges from which it could draw questions to ask prospective administrators. The questions listed here cover many communications areas. You might want to use some of them for screening candidates for certain positions.

- If our district can't see its way clear to employ a full-time communications specialist, how would you assume the main responsibility for communicating with the public? What would your three top communications priorities be and how would you accomplish them?

- If rumors in the community caused major problems for the former superintendent, what steps would you take to assure that rumors were identified by the administration early in their circulation? What steps would you take to disseminate facts to squelch rumors?

- Do you believe that most teachers and other school employees do a good job of communicating with parents and other taxpayers? If not, how would you improve their ability in this area?

- Teachers and other employees have been getting what appears to the public to be appreciable salary increases for the past few years. Working conditions have been improving, too. Taxpayers seem to feel that negotiations have been a one-way street. What would you do to explain "the other side" of negotiations to the public?

- How would you go about determining what the community is thinking regarding a controversial issue facing the schools? If you found that the community opposed an educational innovation you favored, what would you do?

Public Relations Inservice

A safe assumption that the management team can make is that most employees lack specific skills and confidence in the area of school public relations. Yet most staff members want to serve people and communicate effectively. The reasons for this lack of ability can be traced to a lack of preparation in college and a general lack of commitment to the effort. Also, few good inservice materials and knowledgeable speakers were available until recently to upgrade understanding and abilities in this field.

This situation has changed appreciably in the last couple of years as more experts have been identified and as additional practical inservice materials have been prepared. (See the Yellow Pages of this book for suggested sources of help for inservice programs.)

Some state school boards associations are including practical sessions on public relations for board members attending orientation workshops on boardmanship. And board members are coming away from such sessions with a better feel for the communications component of a district's overall administration efforts. The National School Boards Association conducts academies on school public relations for board members and administrators, and provides additional training in this area at its annual convention.

More state and national associations for school administrators are offering workshops and special clinics to help administrators improve their communications skills. Some states are requiring a course in school public relations for administrative certification. Some colleges and the National School Public Relations Association offer workshops in school public relations for graduate credit.

An important step toward improving the effort of the entire school staff in the communications area is to establish the inservice theme as better public relations. By involving a recognized consultant in the field to help prepare short- and long-range goals for the various programs, school district leaders can feel comfortable about moving in the right direction with a planned program.

Any inservice program must provide its participants with a satisfactory answer to one question before the program can be effective: What's in it for me? This must be answered for every employee expected to attend. This necessitates plenty of practical ideas that can be applied almost immediately. One of the best approaches includes involving the people who will attend the sessions in planning the program. This can be accomplished through use of a survey that helps identify communications concerns of the staff.

The scope of the issues or problems to be featured should not be too broad. A session dealing only with generalities will be dismissed – rightly – as useless by most staff members. Be sure that every employee gains a few ideas that will help get the job done better right away. Although a few people will delight in learning some long-range concepts, most staff members will insist on learning *techniques* that will enable them to do their jobs better through more effective communications.

A practical inservice session should include an opportunity for small groups to discuss information presented in an opening session. The groups should identify problems and suggest ways to overcome them. They should also be asked to identify strategies that are working.

Include an evaluation of the inservice program so subsequent attempts will eliminate weaknesses and capitalize on strengths. If groups were not reporting to the entire staff at the meeting, distribute a summary of the main ideas generated by each group. If some of the suggestions can be implemented immediately, do so to demonstrate a willingness to improve communications flow.

An inservice program for administrators could concentrate on topics such as:

- involving more people in the schools;
- preparing effective newsletters;
- writing to be understood by laymen;
- maintaining good staff relations;
- conducting inexpensive surveys;
- getting along with media representatives;
- helping teachers communicate better with parents;
- gaining support for a school referendum;
- improving the layman's understanding of curriculum, and helping parents recognize how they can help children learn better;
- establishing and working with advisory committees.

The district's support staff also must be considered when inservice programs on public relations are planned. The school secretary, for example, often is the public's sole contact with the school. If the secretary understands that he or she "is" the school to some people, the significance of the secretary's role would be better appreciated by the individual who fills it. Once this kind of responsibility is accepted, the secretary is likely to do a better job of camouflaging a "rough day" telephone manner.

The same holds true for the custodian, who may be the first person to greet a visitor. An aide, a cafeteria worker, a bus driver, an intern teacher – each has a public relations role to play. And the nature of that role should be made clear at an inservice workshop.

Encourage outstanding employees in each group to discuss ideas that are working for them in dealing with people. Let each small group come up with its ideas, and distribute them – with credit to the originators. This kind of spirit could become contagious as each support staff member better appreciates the role played in the overall public relations effort of the schools. If these employees are not included in some such inservice program, they may feel forgotten, and conclude that they have no important role in communicating.

As noted earlier, the superintendent must make the commitment in terms of inservice time and money if the intent of better communications is to be translated into action. Only if the person at the top establishes the tone and the need will other employees develop the attitudes needed to reach the level of excellence sought in sound communications.

GETTING THE JOB DONE

Starting on a Shoestring

Once the decision is made to improve communications, some school districts want to move ahead immediately even if only limited funds are available. Some of the ideas offered in the following paragraphs might be useful at the start of most programs. They cost little money and can pay big dividends in terms of improved communications.

- *Establish feedback system.* As explained elsewhere, this key communications concept is an especially effective one and costs little if any money to establish and maintain. Identify people who are talking to and trusted by large numbers of people and ask them to serve as key communicators for the schools.

- *Arrange an inservice workshop.* Invite all employees to it, and ask them to list audiences served by the district and to provide suggestions for improving this service by way of better communication. This is an inexpensive way to begin and has been known to reap many public relations rewards.

- *Share successes.* Memorandum or internal newsletters sharing communications ideas that are working often have a snowball effect as more and more employees try them and find them successful.

- *Use community volunteers.* All communities have talent. Look for it. Volunteers often can write effective news stories and newsletters – inexpensively.

- *Involve lots of people.* The PTA or other service groups often can be persuaded to examine the need for better school communications as part of their year's program thrust. Often such organizations are seeking special projects or a year-long theme for their community involvement efforts.

- *Use cheap but effective devices.* Encouraging teachers to send "Happygrams" to parents of children who do something exceedingly well will bring a positive flavor to homes. Such forms are inexpensive to print.

- *Provide secretarial help for the person charged with doing the public relations work.* Without such help, the public relations effort is likely to bog down in clerical tasks. Furthermore, many time-pressured tasks will not be accomplished if clerical help is not available.

- *Start with modest reproduction equipment.* A mimeograph machine that can use electronic stencils can be inexpensive and still prepare attractive publications. The same is true of some smaller offset units. A typewriter that uses interchangeable "golf balls" (varied kinds of type) is an asset to the written phase of any public relations program. It affords versatility and improves the appearance of camera-ready publications prepared in the schools.

- *Install a direct-line telephone.* The person responsible for public relations should be provided with a telephone not connected to the switchboard. When emergencies occur, this small investment proves its worth.

Part-Time Public Relations Responsibility

Although no completely effective substitute exists for a full-time communications specialist, alternatives do exist for those school districts that are unable to undertake a full-time commitment. Here are some suggestions:

ADMINISTRATORS: With a communications background, an administrator can also be a part-time public relations director. An administrator's responsibilities frequently involve community relations anyway, and he or she is usually aware of what's going on in the school.

Some systems combine two major administrative responsibilities, such as public relations and personnel. Other combinations used with public relations are grant-writing, adult education and community education. Although not ideal, this approach does communicate a commitment to public relations.

SCHOOL BOARD MEMBERS: Board members certainly are capable of handling numerous public relations responsibilities. Nevertheless, their first and most important responsibility is establishing policy. Consequently, while their public relations contributions can be real, they should not be burdened with administrative aspects of the public relations efforts.

GRADUATE STUDENTS: These persons from nearby universities can offer schools inexpensive, yet professional help. Some students are required to serve internships as requirements for advanced degrees. For the price of the student's tuition and a small yearly salary, a school system sometimes can acquire the talent, experience and enthusiasm that such a student offers. Check with local colleges and universities.

PART-TIME NEWS GATHERERS: Many persons with no previous experience can be trained to be efficient news gatherers. A small school district can enjoy an adequate communications network by using community people on a volunteer basis to identify school news and write news releases. Although news releases should only be a small part of a school's public relations efforts, they represent time-consuming work, and could be handled effectively by volunteers – provided that the efforts of these volunteer news gatherers are coordinated, usually by an administrator.

TEACHER: Some teachers in your district's employ already may have backgrounds in the communications field. Working on a part-time basis, they may be able to handle some of the basic duties of a school public relations office – either for an extra stipend or by compensation in the form of a reduced teaching schedule. But don't expect miracles from teachers. Their first responsibility is to their classroom duties. When emergencies arise, or when the teacher-PR person is needed to meet with reporters, greet a special guest, or to take photographs, he or she may not be able to leave the classroom. Using a teacher as a part-time public relations person also means a precarious tightrope must be walked at negotiations time because the person's double responsibilities make him or her both management *and* labor.

Appointing the Right Person on a Full-Time Basis

A school district's commitment to use of a full-time communications specialist is a decision that should be based on demonstrated need as evidenced by a survey of staff and community or by a report of an advisory or study committee. At the very least, this ensures better community acceptance of the decision.

After the decision is made, a job description should be written (see page 11). It sometimes is useful to obtain the services of a school public relations

consultant at this stage – to help evaluate the district's current communications efforts and to help develop the overall plan of communications operation. This person also can assist in selecting the right applicant for the full-time communications job. The *key* to a successful program is hiring the right person for the job. To do less is to endanger the existence of the position in following years.

The right person in the job of communications specialist will suggest communications ideas, will anticipate and minimize problems, and generally will advise school officials on the best ways to communicate what to whom. More than just a news-release writer, the communications specialist is a planner who can chart a communications course that leads to better two-way communication and increased support for the schools.

It's imperative that the person chosen be able to get along with all kinds of people. Daily challenges might include working with school board members who don't agree on major communications policy decisions, administrators who fail to see the need for public relations efforts, reporters facing deadline pressures, printers who need just one more day to complete a job, irate taxpayers, and staff members with varied moods and concerns.

Flexibility and the ability to turn the other cheek are necessary characteristics for the successful school public relations person, especially since many problems will continue to be blamed on poor communications. On the other hand, the person must be competent and confident enough in the fields of public relations to tell school officials when their judgment appears to be wrong. The person should be a communications leader, counted on by management for a regular flow of new ideas to improve the school's image and communications program.

The person must be able to write extremely well and should be able to speak effectively to small and large groups. A complete command of the language and its grammar is an obvious expectation inasmuch as the person will probably be considered the authority for most statements leaving the district in newsletter or news release form. The person must be able to write at a language level that is comfortable for all audiences, and must be able to translate the educational jargon of staff members into good English. (Numerous studies show that the public often lacks confidence in educators because of the seemingly mindless jargon they inflict on people whose support they need.)

Thinking quickly and knowing when to say "I don't know" are two important requirements for the successful public relations specialist who often serves as an official spokesperson for the schools, and can be challenged by intelligent questions when meeting with community groups.

The person's manner must be one of sincerity and directness, and never should leave the impression of covering something up with a veneer of pleasantness.

The public relations person must be mature enough for school board members and administrators to feel comfortable with him or her in discussing topics as diverse as the placement of a $14 million dollar building or the need to dismiss a popular teacher. Maturity, not to be equated necessarily with age, is essential if the person is to build confidence in the public relations role in school undertakings.

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Another desired characteristic – one that is difficult to identify – is enthusiasm. In meeting many people, the school communications person must communicate a certain positive feeling about the schools – pleasantly zealous but not a cheerleader type who bubbles at interview time. A check with former employers or college professors can be helpful in determining whether this important intangible exists in applicants who demonstrate the technical skills required of the job. And don't hire a nine-to-fiver. The right person will be ready to work all kinds of irregular hours.

It is potentially helpful if the applicant for the district's public relations job has some special preparation in the field of educational public relations. But because only a few colleges offer such programs, finding such people is difficult. A journalistic background usually is promising – people with it usually write well and know how to work under deadline pressure.

To improve chances of finding the right person, here are some questions to put to applicants:

- Can you write news releases to explain educational ideas in layman's terms? Don't settle for a yes. Give your top candidates some facts and ask them to write a news release.

- Can you prepare publications from start to finish, including specifications for bidding by printers? Show some sample publications to the candidates and ask them how they might improve these publications.

- How can we improve our chances of knowing what the community's concerns about education are before large numbers of people become upset?

- What are your key thoughts on conducting a campaign to gain voter support for a school finance election?

- What are your ideas on the role you can play in upgrading the public relations skills of other employees?

- Do you believe the public relations specialist should be part of the administrative cabinet? Why?

- What do you think the hours of this job should be? (Forget any applicant who puts time limits on the job.)

Before making a final decision, talk to people with whom the candidate has worked. How well does the person get along with other people? What's the person's attitude toward working hard? Can the person be criticized and continue to work efficiently? (Public relations people ought to be used to criticism – they seldom can please all of the people all of the time.)

Once you've hired a full-time specialist, give him or her time to get started. The person will need time to establish the kinds of relationships needed to do an effective job. Do not expect major results during the first few weeks of the effort.

Too often, school administrators await the arrival of the full-time public relations person so they can dump their least-desired jobs on the new desk. The only way to prevent this is for the superintendent to step in and define clearly the responsibilities of the public relations position. For example, one assistant superintendent might decide that completing surveys on any topic is a form of public relations. Another may think that conducting the local United Way drive

is a natural for the public relations person. These may indeed be proper jobs for the new person, but they should not be assigned capriciously by individual higher-ups. If survey-taking and charity drives are to be part of the public relations person's responsibilities, the job description should say so. Remember, in any case, that these kinds of jobs will subtract from the results of a full-time communications effort.

If the communications person is to do an effective job for the school district, his or her attendance at administrative cabinet meetings and executive sessions of the school board should be required. The person's opinion about public relations ramifications of major curricular, busing, and attendance-line changes should be sought – before attempts to implement them are begun.

Other employees should be told to inform the public relations person about events and achievements or problems that could have public relations implications. Only when information is available can the communications specialist be expected to help.

Finding the right person is difficult and requires serious consideration and screening. The National School Public Relations Association, Arlington, Va., and the colleges listed in the Yellow Pages section of this book offer placement assistance to school officials in locating people interested in educational public relations positions.

When announcing the appointment of someone to direct communications efforts, provide some information about the person's background and quote the person's basic philosophy about how communications can improve the schools. It's also a good idea to involve some of your community's key communicators and media representatives in a pre-announcement meeting that explains the various responsibilities of the position and introduces the person who will be handling the job. This will provide many people in the community with an almost immediate better feel for the position than would have been the case had the news gone out through the rumor mill. The idea is to explain the district's hopes that its improved communications effort will help people in many ways: students to learn better; staff to improve morale; and citizens to know more about how the schools function and how the schools might help them and their children.

Costs

One of the most often cited reasons for a school district's not making a full commitment to improved communications is the cost. Many management team members look at the salary of a full-time public relations person and conclude that the public would not balk at the expenditure. (As noted elsewhere, when citizens are involved in studying communications needs, they are more ready to support the cost of backing the program.)

A sound approach to explaining costs is to put them on a per-person basis. When most people are asked if they approve spending a dollar a year to communicate with each person in the district, they respond positively. And most districts appointing a full-time person for communications would be spending less than a dollar per person in the district. One guideline offered by an attorney for a state school boards association is that the communications budget not exceed 1% of the operating budget. Most districts never come anywhere close to that figure.

With more school districts moving toward budget systems that clearly show how much is being spent for what, it is more difficult to disguise the costs of public relations – as some districts prefer to do. For example, teacher recruitment brochures came from personnel office funds, internal newsletter and news release costs were partially borne by each department (because much of the information benefited them, it was argued). Although these statements are true and aspects of this approach can still be applied successfully, it must be remembered that somewhere along the line the management team must explain that communications is a vital part of the school's operation and that money is needed to make it work right.

Salaries of full-time communications specialists vary greatly. In some districts, the person is paid little more than a teacher. In such cases, the person is usually seen as a preparer of news releases and newsletters rather than as a member of the administrative team.

Other school districts pay the communications person at a level of the assistant superintendents; in some cases, the people serving in the key communications capacity *are* assistant superintendents.

Here is a one-year public relations budget for a suburban school district serving 50,000 citizens.

BUDGET FOR 1974–75 SCHOOL YEAR

I. PUBLICATIONS AND PRINTING

A. Existing Publications

1. Five editions of *Outlook* (community newsletter) (One more than this year – I would like to have one in "hold" position in case of an emergency or crisis.)

Printing	$2,000
Mailing	1,275
Addressing	1,400
	$4,675

2. *Inlook* (internal newsletter) Printing of banner only; same format as we have now, but attempt to come up with more issues — $ 200
3. *The Gist* (report of Board of Education meetings) Printing of banner only, and extra sheets — $ 224
4. *Communication Wire* (special reports) Printing of banner only — $ 80
5. News Release Sheets — $ 16
6. Fact Sheets — $ 16
7. Calendar and Personnel Listing (Note: *Not* needed if decision made to adopt new calendar/parent handbook) — $ 350
8. Personnel Directory — $1,000

I.	PUBLICATIONS AND PRINTING (continued)	
	9. Gold Card Passes	$ 35
	10. Employee I.D.'s	$ 35
	11. Good News Notes	$ 200
	12. Free and Reduced Lunch Program (Letters)	$ 200
	13. Cafeteria Vendor Forms	$ 20
	14. Teacher Handbook Covers	$ 50
	15. Calendar and Paydates	$ 35
	B. New Publications	
	1. Parent Handbook/District Calendar	$3,000
	2. School Board Meeting Brochure	$ 250
	3. Facts and Figures Brochure	$ 200
	4. *Focus* – A parent's newsletter (four issues)	$ 500
	5. Special Interest Publication (e.g., *Healthy=Happy*)	$ 500
	6. Printing Awards for Volunteers and Students of the Month	$ 100
	7. Volunteer Brochure	$ 150
	TOTAL PRINTING AND PUBLICATION COSTS	**$11,786**
II.	**MATERIALS**	
	1. Twenty-five (25) sheets of carbon transfer letters used in graphic work	$ 65
	2. Card File – Double Drawer Unit (For 5" x 8" cards)	$ 15
	3. Radiimaster – used in graphic work	$ 3
	4. Double Knife Set – used in graphic work	$ 3
	5. Bulletin Board (36" x 48")	$ 16
	6. T-Square – for graphic work	$ 1
	7. Desk Drawer Insert/Organizer (11¾" x 20½" x 3")	$ 6
	8. Slide (Photography) File Cabinet–Two Drawer (19½" x 17½" x 6")	$ 42
	9. Four-Slide File Inserts	$ 30
	TOTAL MATERIALS	**$ 181**
III.	**PHOTOGRAPHY AND SUPPLIES**	**$ 350**
IV.	**SUBSCRIPTIONS**	
	1. *Bucks County Tribune*	$ 12
	2. *Education Wire*	$ 10
	3. *NSPRA Communication Service*	$ 50
	4. *Educational Press Association*	$ 40
	5. *PSBA Bulletin*	$ 5

IV.	SUBSCRIPTIONS (continued)	
6.	*PSBA Information Legislative Service*	$ 20
7.	*Elementary School Public Relations Kit*	$ 60
8.	Publications and Kits throughout the Year	$ 85
	TOTAL SUBSCRIPTIONS	**$ 282**
V.	**OTHER ITEMS**	
1.	Superintendent's Information Luncheons	$ 130
2.	Conference Attendance	$ 400
3.	Tapes for Radio Show	$ 50
4.	Code-A-Phone (Records messages, gives out information – snow closings, delays, etc.)	$ 550
5.	Travel Expenses	$ 720
	TOTAL OTHER ITEMS	**$1,850**
VI.	**SALARIES**	
1.	Administrative Assistant for PR and Secretary	$21,000
	TOTAL SALARIES	**$21,000**
	TOTAL BUDGET	**$35,449**

WORKING WITH THE COMMUNITY

Finding Out What the Community Thinks

"You're spending too much money on newsletters; I want the number cut from six to four a year," one taxpayer complained at a school board meeting. The board over-reacted and decided to do just that.

Where was the evidence to support the decision? Did the one person complaining represent the thinking of a large number of people? Or was this merely the complaint of one person who may have been out of touch with the thinking of most taxpayers?

Basing reactions and decisions on the comments of a few vocal people attending board meetings can cause all sorts of problems. Although this procedure might calm the few critics, it does a disservice to many people whose views are opposed to those of the few complainers.

Knowing what a school district's various audiences are thinking about the schools and encouraging people to communicate with the schools should be two major objectives of the overall school communications effort.

The school management team can make life appreciably easier by establishing and using a feedback network that communicates community concerns before those concerns grow to giant demands. The up-to-date school official knows the community's thoughts on all major issues and then anticipates the consequences of decisions that are inconsistent with public thinking. This does not imply that school board members should establish only policies that are consistent with public thinking on an issue. It does mean, however, that school officials must be ready to offer evidence to persuade the community that the decision is the soundest one possible.

Knowing the community's thinking allows the management team to avoid unexpected problems and to minimize crises caused by weak communications efforts. Encouraging people to let the schools know their thinking about educational topics implies an openness that people appreciate, especially in an age of large and inaccessible agencies.

When a public relations effort merely doles information to people, information recipients justifiably can conclude that school officials aren't interested in communicating. "They just want to look good with a lot of favorable publicity," some critics will say – rightly.

When a two-way communications effort is unveiled, people are offered opportunities to provide input to school administrators and others to improve the schools. They feel more comfortable about voicing opinions and suggesting improvements. They feel that the schools are interested in people and ideas people have. Generally these kinds of feelings lead to a conclusion that the schools do indeed belong to the public and that problems can be solved better if the public helps.

For example, if vandalism is causing severe school board and administrative concern, simply complaining to each other won't do much to solve the problem. But making the problem one that the community should work together to overcome can help. Using money that once was spent on the replacing of

damaged materials to purchase books can build a community-school bond that can prove useful in many situations.

Most school board members and school administrators attained their position by being able to convince some individual or group that they were qualified to do the job. Most school officials, by the nature of their responsibilities, are able to *talk* to people well. But many school officials seem unable to *listen.*

Here are some ways to determine your community's thinking on key school issues.

The survey. More and more school districts are turning to surveys to assess community opinion about schools. Costs of surveys vary enormously – from tens of thousands of dollars to as little as $100. It all depends on the degree of preciseness needed in the results.

Unless the community or the staff is blessed with someone knowledgeable in surveying, it usually is advisable to employ a consultant in some capacity to assure that the survey will provide the information desired. Using an expert properly will eliminate possible criticisms of incorrect procedures that might otherwise be leveled by those who dislike the results. When an outside expert is tapped, an air of integrity usually accompanies the study. Most people conclude that such a person has nothing to gain, other than a fee, from the undertaking. In communities where people lack confidence in the management team or where the school board is split, such consideration becomes important.

Many school districts try to use existing communications vehicles to conduct a survey. They might, for instance, include a questionnaire in a community newsletter. Or send questionnaires to all households. Both of these approaches are solid public relations techniques in that they demonstrate to large numbers of people that their opinion is sought. But, returns usually are less than satisfactory, with only 10 to 20% of the potential respondents replying. The data thereby collected can not be considered by any researcher as indicative of the thinking of the community.

A better low-cost approach is to involve the community in surveying itself. With training in proper interview techniques and proper sample selection, volunteers could acquire usable data. But remember that some people being interviewed may be less than candid when they know the interviewers are from their own district.

Any time a commitment is made to survey, the same kind of commitment must be made to publicize the results. If this is not done, people understandably will be upset about the secrecy of what they consider public information.

Using key communicators. This no-cost approach to obtaining acquiring information is gaining popularity around the country because it serves two purposes: it provides almost instant feedback; it enables school personnel to communicate a message quickly to large numbers of people.

It works like this: school management team members identify those people (in the school and in the community) who talk to and are trusted by large

numbers of people. This can be done by principals on a school basis or by the superintendent on a districtwide basis. People identified (who might number 20 in a high school and 35 in the high school community, but numbers are not important) are invited by the administrator to serve in a key communicator capacity. People are invited by letter and personal telephone call from the administrator to sit (perhaps at lunch) for an hour with the administrator and five to seven others chosen as key communicators.

Informal conversation and no agenda mark the meeting. People are asked to call the administrator if they hear a rumor or have a question about the schools. They are also asked to communicate news about the schools if the administrator gets in touch with them with specific information.

The potential of this relatively simple device has been realized in many school districts. It has squelched rumors before they gained steam; it has helped pass tax levies when last-minute misinformation was circulated by referendum opponents; it has prevented racial riots because information spread accurately throughout a community; and generally it has made life easier for school boards and administrators.

Internal key communicators serve an important purpose in apprising administrators of potential problems and in letting staff and students know about controversial decisions so accurate information can be brought to others in the community.

"I have a question" and "I have a suggestion" cards. Placed in places frequented by large numbers of people, these cards – addressed to the superintendent – offer people a chance to communicate easily. When received, the cards should be responded to, if names and addresses or telephone numbers are provided. Sound suggestions should be implemented and people thanked for those suggestions. Questions frequently asked might be repeated in a Question and Answer column in the local newspaper or in the district's newsletter.

A hot line. In an age of impersonalness, some people prefer not to visit the schools; yet they have questions and suggestions. Some don't feel comfortable about writing such ideas. For them, a telephone number to call with questions or suggestions might make the schools seem concerned and accessible – two desired outcomes. This number must be well publicized and the person answering the telephone must be extremely well trained on what to do with the suggestions and requests.

The coffee klatsch. Many school officials have learned quite a lot about their schools at small-group meetings with taxpayers. Called coffee klatsches by some, these meetings – often held in homes – allow friends and neighbors an hour or so with school officials to talk informally about their concerns. Used often in connection with public voting on school finance issues, this vehicle can be effective on a broader basis.

Questionnaires at major school events. When large crowds attend football games, plays and other school events, it should be relatively easy to gain their thinking on educational topics. Including a tearout short questionnaire in a football program makes it easy for people to communicate their thinking on a

school topic before leaving the stadium. The same holds true for back-to-school night programs, a concert or virtually any school undertaking.

Advisory Committees

As legislative mandates and other pressures dictate that more schools involve advisory committees in information-gathering and advice-giving, more school officials are seeking the best ways to use advisory committees.

One of the main concerns of some school officials focuses on the possibility that such committees might become so powerful that they eventually could challenge school boards for control of the schools. Such a consideration is legitimate; once people become involved, they very well might want to become involved even more. This could mean running for the school board.

Many school board members and school administrators fear advisory groups because they feel that such public involvement will lead to additional and more specific criticism of schools. Others feel that such advisory groups will want to have a say in almost all policy decisions and in the way the schools are run on an everyday basis.

Yet this has not been the case generally. Public involvement usually has led to increased public support for the schools. And it has persuaded former critics of the schools to become avid supporters. Two fairly recent studies indicate that board members and administrators were pleasantly surprised with the results of public involvement in advisory and goal-setting capacities.

One study made of some 100 school board presidents and superintendents in districts where advisory committees included strong critics of the schools found that more than nine of 10 critics became supporters of the schools after serving on such committees. And their previously negative attitudes did not affect the positive disposition of other members.

A study of some 50 school officials in California, where public involvement in educational goal-setting is required by law, found that all of the educators surveyed would include such public involvement again even if it weren't mandated. Comments from some of the respondents included: "It took the monkey off our back and put it on the community's"; "People now have a better understanding of the challenges we face"; and "People who got involved in goal-setting are now our biggest boosters."

No matter which method of involvement is chosen, it is vital that everyone understand the ground rules. Failure to do so produces a multitude of problems for the management team. For this reason, the following questions should be considered seriously before embarking on a commitment to advisory groups.

1. What is the purpose of the group? Unless the management team and the people being asked to serve in an advisory capacity understand why the group is being formed, what its goals are and what will be done with its advice, severe problems can occur at almost any time.

2. Does everyone understand the bylaws? Agreeing on bylaws for all such groups is important; if this is not done, some members may try to use the committee for personal recognition. It must be made clear in the bylaws who the

spokesperson is and how the views of dissenters to the majority recommendation can be communicated to the schools.

3. How are members to be chosen? If believability of the advisory committee is to result, the members named to it should come from many different sectors of the community. Consider where people live, their ethnic background, their education, their involvement with groups and other facts important in your community. Be sure to include some people who are critical of the schools or people will feel the group is nothing more than a rubber stamp for the school board.

4. What deadlines will be established for reports? When committees operate without the catalyst of a deadline, often they fail to complete reports in time to do the schools any good. Usually people serving on such committees are busy people; unless they see the immediate need for meeting on a regular basis to get the job done, they will fill their calendars with other seemingly pressing business. And be sure to establish a date for officially *dissolving* the committee.

5. How will the board respond? After the committee has made its report, the school board should respond as soon as feasible to the recommendations. When the recommendations can't be implemented, convincing reasons should be given. In any event, people who served should be thanked formally and publicly.

An excellent booklet that explains in detail the promise and pitfalls of advisory committees and provides detailed guidelines for establishing such committees is available from the National School Public Relations Association. (See the Yellow Pages of this book for more information.)

GETTING THE MOST FROM THE MEDIA AND PUBLICATIONS

Getting Along with the Press

Whenever public relations seminars and workshops are conducted for school board members and superintendents, one key topic that always emerges is the relationship between the schools and the media (newspapers, radio and television). Even though other communications vehicles may pay better dividends and may encourage more public support than the mass media, school officials appear more concerned about getting along with the press than about most other areas of public relations.

Perhaps this is because no one enjoys criticism; and the media will point out problems in the schools or mistakes allegedly made by those running them. One of the key criticisms leveled by school officials is that newspapers and radio - TV dwell on the negative and emphasize what school people consider trivia. Not enough positive news about the schools is included in newspapers, many school officials claim.

On the other hand, the people reporting the news claim that school officials don't know what constitutes news. Nor, reporters say, do school administrators realize that the language they use destroys any kind of confidence they're trying to build. Reporters are quick to point out that administrators are seldom available for comment when a problem occurs. Yet, they note, the public is interested in the school's view of challenging situations.

Reporters add that too often school board members and superintendents forget that public schools belong to the public. And that any group of people dealing with large sums of tax money must be subjected to the scrutiny of reporters trained to be skeptical. Newspapers often consider themselves as guardians of the public trust; therefore, they like to feel that they are responsible for issuing an occasional report card on how well the schools are doing.

Board members and superintendents who attempt to withhold public information from reporters do themselves and the people they serve a disservice. *Eventually the power of the press will prevail and the schools lose more than the right to hide public information.* Here's one example of how one school district hurt its relationship with the public.

A new high school principal was appointed with the usual publicity that accompanies such an occurrence in a suburban town with one local weekly and one area daily newspaper. The daily newspaper asked the superintendent for the salary being paid to the new principal. The superintendent refused to provide the information.

The newspaper, after cajoling the superintendent and the school board for the salary, wrote editorials and went to court to obtain the information. The court ruled that such information is indeed public and must be made available. The schools not only lost the specific battle but an air of confrontation was established between the newspaper and the schools. And the public wondered what else the schools were hiding.

Each state has a different outlook on the public's right to know and school

for information they fear might be concealed. And the public seldom allies itself with any large public agency.

Here are some tips to improve relations between the schools and the press:

- Have someone on the administrative team get to know mass media representatives on a first-name basis.

- Establish a relationship that allows an occasional off-the-record comment. Example: A member of a college board of trustees suggested at a public meeting that a black be invited to speak at commencement ceremonies. The college president said that this could not be possible.

Reporters rushed for telephones, causing the public relations director to envision large headlines exclaiming the president's apparent anti-black statement. The public relations person, who had established a first-name relationship of believability with the press, asked if he might share off-the-record information. The press accepted the idea and the story was told. The college president, unknown to all but the board president and the public relations director, had a commitment from the President of the United States to speak at the commencement. For security reasons, this could not be announced in Ap

The reporters respected the off-the-record information. And no problems occurred. The incident points out the importance of the public relations person's knowing key facts and also the need for someone on the management team to foster the kind of relationship with the press that allows for confidence in such touchy situations.

- Determine what's important enough to be used by the press and prepare it in a form that makes it easy to use. Many newspapers and radio stations are understaffed and don't have the time to work on feature stories and informative tapes. The program of press relationships should include a decision on what is to be publicized. (See section on goals and objectives on page 8.)

- Conduct a brief inservice program for all school board members and employees so they know what news is and how to get positive news used by newspapers and the electronic media.

- Be available when negative news occurs. People respect an administrator or school board member who can recognize a problem and suggest ways to solve it.

- Accept the fact that newspaper readers want to know about problems and controversy. Thus, reporters are merely doing their job when they seek answers to tough questions.

- Establish a policy on who speaks for the schools.

- Invite reporters to discuss some of your public relations problems. Often their suggestions will be useful, and they enjoy being asked.

Preparing Effective Publications

Most schools prepare some publications in an attempt to communicate with certain audiences. Regrettably a large number of the publications are read by few people. Why? Because they are poorly written, visually dull and contain information that does not interest the audiences for which they are intended.

Much time and money is spent preparing school publications. Therefore it makes sense to expect the publications to be effective. But judges of national school publications contests insist that many publications entered should not have been printed. An excellent investment for the management team is tapping a publications expert to critique existing publications or to help plan new ones. The small amount spent for the consultant will pay off in many ways: money saved by applying suggested printing changes; increased readership because of better layout and design; and better content that pleases and informs readers.

Too many districts start a general newsletter because they want to follow the lead of neighboring districts. A better approach is to determine what needs to be communicated and which communications possibilities will do the job most effectively for the least money.

Here are some basic publications that school districts can use to inform various audiences;

A general newsletter. Most studies indicate that taxpayers like to receive school information by way of a newsletter. If feedback is obtained to determine topics that people want to know about, the newsletter can be prepared to meet audience needs. If this is not done, often the publication can be little more than an avenue for articles that extol the virtues of the district. There's nothing wrong with citing accomplishments, but a steady diet of puffery will not set the stage for additional support when major needs finally are admitted. School publications should focus honestly on innovations, accomplishments and challenges of the schools.

All publications should be written in good English (without jargon) and at the readers' level of reading comprehension. A practical technique uses a readability formula to figure mathematically the reading level of the writing. This is vital to avoid causing frustration for readers.

Publications prepared for the public should be attractive enough to gain the attention of taxpayers bombarded with numerous magazines and advertising mail. Newsletters should be sent to all residents, not just to parents. Checking with the local postmaster (and the next higher authority if necessary) will bring permission to save labeling costs by addressing school publications to: Postal Patron Local.

Although publications must be attractive, they should not be so expensive looking that taxpayers might justifiably complain about apparent high costs. Effective publications can be prepared in one color if the editor is aware of solid layout techniques.

A wrap-up of board action. Distributed the morning after the meeting, it can improve morale and generally inform the staff – if accurately and fairly written.

Internal newsletters. These can keep the staff informed, serve as an idea exchange, and disseminate teaching and administrative ideas that work. They also can show that the administration cares enough about communications to make a commitment internally. Such publications can apprise employees of national trends in education, can let them know about magazine articles and books on educational topics, and can consider major internal challenges and possible solutions. The astute administrator builds staff confidence by using this vehicle to communicate quickly about issues of staff concern.

Publications that can be useful to your district should be determined by your school board and management team. Each should meet a specific communications need. Some districts have found the following publications helpful:

- *How To Help Your Child Learn How To Read.* Given to parents of kindergarten and first grade children, this booklet has received praise wherever it's been used. Parents see the need and appreciate the communications efforts made by the reading team and the communications specialist.

- *How To Cut Vandalism in Our Schools.* An inexpensive brochure, this publication enlists the aid of citizens to reduce vandalism through public interest. Pointing out how money spent to correct vandalism would be used instead to improve education, this publication can be used in conjunction with a major antivandalism campaign.

- *What Guidance Counselors Can Do To Help.* When most taxpayers attended school, guidance counselors didn't exist. Yet many useful services are offered by guidance counselors – services basically unknown by most parents, many students and some teachers. One of the questions frequently asked in community surveys on schools is: What do guidance counselors do?

Many other publications possibilities exist. A common one is a "Welcome to Kindergarten" brochure that helps parents help their children adjust to school. A brochure that realtors and "welcome wagoners" can use to introduce people to your district can be helpful. And one publication gaining rapid acceptance in more and more schools each year is a school calendar.

The calendar contains dates of school activities and pertinent information about the schools. It includes names of administrators, their telephone numbers, and tips for parents to help their children learn better. Also included are lists of who to call for what, information about various school services and various school-related organizations such as booster clubs, PTA's and others.

Even the best public relations program should evaluate its publications efforts occasionally and ask: Are our publications prepared to meet the information needs of our audiences or are we cranking out publication after publication because we always have done so?

PR STRATEGIES FOR BOARD MEETINGS

National Trends Regarding Openness of Board Meetings

A few years from now, school officials will probably reflect on the recent past and remember executive sessions and the opportunities that once existed for private discussion of school matters. The way trends of complete openness are developing, this kind of reflection might take place nearly everywhere.

Some states, such as Florida, preceded Watergate-caused public pressure by legislating a "Sunshine Law" to insist that deliberations on school matters be done publicly. Other states have more recently adopted similar laws requiring that all public business be discussed publicly.

Some school districts in states not mandating such an open attitude have nevertheless scored points with constituents and the media by adopting an open policy when it comes to school business. Many people feel that the air of honesty and purity that emanates from such open meetings will do much to restore public confidence in education. Legislators in many states certainly feel public pressure to open up meetings of public bodies dealing with public funds. The trend clearly is in that direction. And legislators championing such causes can count on gaining public support. Therefore, most boards should be considering cutting down on the number of meetings closed to the public and the press – even if they feel strongly that such meetings are productive. The many arguments used to counter open meetings are usually unheard by a public that interprets such arguments as attempts to maintain a vestige of secrecy to cover up some possible dealings that might not be acceptable if publicly considered.

Executive Sessions and the Problems They Cause

Only the long-suffering public knows the torment of waiting two or three hours for a school board to reconvene after breaking away from a public meeting to caucus in executive session. The public at first wonders what is being talked about. But as the time drags on, people begin to suspect that something is being hidden from them. Reporters covering the meeting prod school officials with leading questions about the reason for the caucus. Unfavorable headlines result. Unhappy taxpayers get home late. And, unfortunately, some board members who lose the argument in caucus use the balance of the meeting to recoup their losses.

Some states have passed "sunshine laws" to prevent executive caucuses at both the public meetings and work sessions of public officials. Under these laws, the general public, reporters included, may attend any formal meeting of public officials where decisions are made.

Whether a school board wants to adopt its own "sunshine law" is something each board will have to decide for itself. Nevertheless, a few things can be done to eliminate the threat of the executive session, a resented occurrence that alienates voters. The board can agree that no executive sessions will be held once the public meeting has begun except for questions involving personnel. Comprehensive work sessions can familiarize board members with the issues so that they come to the public meeting prepared to vote. Generally, it is the "surprise" that irritates the board member and results in the executive session. If secret sessions must be, hold them before or after the meeting.

As the concept of the public's ownership of the schools clarifies itself in the board member's mind, resistance to the public's observance, even first-hand, of the board's deliberations diminishes. By avoiding the secret agenda, the board can avoid the charge that something is being swept under the rug. Even if it is felt that an executive session is entirely in order, announce to the audience the topic of the private discussion, the reason for the need for privacy, and the approximate time the session will last. Most importantly, board members should try to limit debate in these closed caucuses to keep within the time suggested. Board members ought to remember that an executive session in the midst of a public meeting is an intrusion on the public's time (and right to a public meeting at the time). It's akin to a host and hostess leaving their guests for a few minutes to decide if the planned menu is appropriate. It's not a time for a three-hour family squabble.

Discussing Education at Every Meeting

All taxpayers ought to attend at least one meeting of the board of education. Surprisingly, many people don't realize that such meetings are open to the public. If they did attend, they'd usually witness sincere dedicated school board members working for the education of the community's children. Unfortunately, at some meetings, they would also be subjected to some lengthy debates over the color of school lockers, the merits of resodding the football field, and whether the superintendent provided enough information in the pre-board meeting information packet. Unless the public knew better, it might conclude that the board spent very little time on educational matters or discussing children.

Some reporters covering three- or four-hour school board meetings return to their offices still searching for a story more important than which low bidder received the paper supply contract.

To overcome these problems, some school boards have begun special reports at each meeting to focus on some educational innovation or accomplishment. At one meeting, the director of reading might report on progress made in certain grades because of a new program. At another meeting, the physical education department might explain how students are being prepared for carryover athletic activities and might contrast today's program with what school board members and the superintendent experienced when they attended school.

Other districts include student presentations at board meetings. Such reports and programs, although usually for the benefit of the board, reap dividends with the public and with the media representatives. Often reporters will prepare feature stories on these reports, showing that children are still the prime concern of the school board.

Both the board president and the superintendent should sprinkle the agenda with child-centered items whenever possible. Examples of children's work might be available in the areas around the meeting place. These kinds of efforts will allow the public and the press to come away from meetings convinced that the board sees clearly what its prime responsibilities are. People will also be better informed about the reasons for their tax money going to the schools. Taxpayers who supported a higher budget to employ two new speech therapists are seldom

told what those two new staff members accomplished. Why not include a brief report explaining that 120 students overcame a stuttering problem because of this new help? This kind of information builds a quiet kind of understanding that can lead to support when needed.

Planning the Board Meeting for Maximum PR Impact

Public school board meetings, when properly managed, provide excellent opportunities to share the goals and the activities of the board with the community and the press. But the opportunities are also fraught with traps that unfortunately snare some school board members and superintendents.

School officials must remember that everything said at a public meeting is indeed *on* the record. Attempts to categorize a regretted comment as off-the-record will fail if astute reporters insist. To discourage school board members, superintendents and others from making rash statements, many boards tape-record their proceedings. In fact, some boards videotape their meetings; others televise them live, encouraging participants to consider carefully what they say.

Most people who attend school board meetings want to understand what's going on. They don't like to feel as if their opinions don't count. Nor do they desire to go away from the meeting with the feeling that they didn't have a chance to have their opinions considered. People also dislike immensely decisions that smack of bias.

To help people understand how the board works, many school districts prepare a "Welcome to the School Board Meeting" brochure that is distributed to all who attend. The brochure contains information about board members (and perhaps their photographs to help people identify them). It provides information on how board members are selected and the board's responsibilities. It explains the board's policies regarding the time and way to address the board. And it can include basic board policies that deal with community involvement and use of school buildings. Providing this kind of information enables people to understand that the same rules apply to everyone and that rules are not suddenly created to discourage certain individuals or groups from providing input at a meeting.

When people address the school board in a way that could trigger trouble, board members must not be coaxed into arguments that serve as a platform for critics' diatribes. Sometimes a polite "thank you" after a critic has had a say disarms the person. The board president should maintain control of the meeting and should make it clear that outcries will not be tolerated. But, it is important to recognize that people who attend meetings are eager and anxious for their points of view to be heard. And they do want some assurance that those viewpoints will be considered before board action is taken on those topics. Allowing public participation only after votes have been recorded does little to build public confidence in school officials – little can be more infuriating to well-intentioned and intelligent people.

It is also a touch of consideration to allow public comment early in the meeting (with stipulated ground rules including time limits) so that people interested in only that portion of the meeting may leave early.

The chairperson of the meeting should attempt to control the length of board member comments so that an inordinate amount of time isn't devoted to relatively minor items. It is important, however, for people to understand what is being voted on. Even though school board members may have deliberated on a topic for quite a while, audience members may be hearing about it for the first time. Using language that doesn't confuse the public, school officials should explain what a resolution means or what the acceptance of a federal grant will do for the district. Technical language involving financial transactions or construction terminology should be avoided or explained. Educational jargon is one of the prime reasons for a lack of public confidence in educators; it should be avoided at board meetings (and in most other places as well).

Many boards also avoid discussions of controversial issues by voting unanimously even though dissent existed in non-public discussions. Although this unanimous approach helps gain public support for a building program, it can stir people who feel that their thinking on many subjects is not being represented. Showing both sides of an issue before voting on it can pay dividends in that people will at least appreciate that both sides of a question were considered.

Here are some other public relations tips for conducting school board meetings:

- Distribute agenda to all who attend.
- Have the superintendent or communications specialist go over the agenda and expected actions with reporters a half day or so before the meeting. This enables reporters to prepare some stories without the hurried pressure of post-meeting deadlines. Of course, a school representative should let all reporters know if some change intervened between the earlier briefing and the school board meeting.
- Have ashtrays, paper, pencils and other materials for reporters and seat them at a table that's close enough to school board members for easy coverage.
- Install microphones and whatever amplification equipment is needed to assure everyone's hearing all comments.
- Identify board members and the superintendent with signs large enough to be seen by the audience.
- Assign some administrator to be available to the media representatives after the meeting. This includes providing a home telephone number that can be called at 2 a.m. to check on facts.
- Prepare a statement for the local radio stations that can be used on the news. This information should focus on key actions taken.
- Prepare a one-page wrap-up of board action for distribution to all employees the day after the meeting. Although this requires someone's working late, it's a solid way to improve morale and to get facts out without the filters of others.

PLANNING AND EVALUATING PR EFFORTS

Public Relations and Management by Objectives

What should our public relations person do?

This question was directed to a school public relations consultant conducting a regional public relations workshop. It was asked privately and individually by three people from a school district that had just appointed its first public relations person. A school board member, the superintendent and the newly appointed public relations person all asked the question.

Although all agree that the goal is improved communication, each sees the specific objectives and the means to reach those objectives differently. That's why more schools each year are turning to a Management By Objectives (MBO) approach for administrative efforts. The public relations component of MBO is still in its infancy, but the movement in this direction is growing.

To know where one is going is half the trip. Clear objectives for the public relations efforts are a must to avoid wasted effort and inadequate evaluation of work done. Unless the management team agrees on objectives for communications efforts, the public relations person can work 80 hours a week producing effective communications vehicles that work only to have superiors perceive the objectives as something else than on which the public relations person concentrated. Evaluation of the effort, therefore, is likely to be low. The point is that the priorities of the public relations effort must be clear to all.

The nature of the public relations position is such that daily pressures and concerns demand a large amount of the work day. Staff members constantly drop in to pursue publicity for their programs. If the public relations person does little more than react to daily requests from staff members for news releases and publications, the entire day and week and eventually the entire year could be claimed by such responsibilities. This causes the exclusion of other key communications duties.

To eliminate this possibility, the management team should develop an agreed-upon plan that includes clearly stated objectives. Working with other school management team members (because their needs are an important component of public relations objectives), the communications person establishes achievable communications objectives. These are followed by specific strategies to accomplish the objectives and measurable standards for success. Once the plan has been approved by the management team, the public relations person has a course charted – one not easily vulnerable to daily whims and pressures.

Perhaps now news releases will be written to explain the district's new approach to teaching reading because better public understanding of the reading program is one of the ingredients of the overall public relations plan. This may mean that fewer releases are written about a teacher's trip to Africa or about the drama club's efforts. But that's the kind of time-use decision that MBO forces. Matching daily tasks to strategies, motivation to objectives and products to standards of success, the public relations person and the management team can monitor the course of the communications program.

There are a number of ways to use the MBO system. One way is to classify the objectives as routine, problem-solving, creative or personal. Routine objectives might include increasing the column-inches of school news in the local press. Problem-solving might mean the elimination of repeated bad feeling on the part of a segment of the community over a proposed board action (e.g., bond issues for new school construction). This objective involves research. A creative objective might involve the setting up of a Key Communicator (see page 31) luncheon strategy to improve two-way communications with the community. Personal objectives would involve the advancement of the practitioner in skill, knowledge and contacts for the benefit of the school district.

Another use of MBO is to carry every objective out to its logical conclusion complete with timetable, specific strategies, agents and budget. By graphically depicting what it will take to achieve a specific objective, the public relations person can readily account for time spent. Both administrators and board members can monitor the progress of the communications program by referring to the chart which is constantly updated by the communications person. Deviations from the plan will need the specific approval of the management team or the superintendent. In any case, the evaluation standards are changed accordingly.

In one school district the management team "retreated" from daily tasks for a full week of master planning for the school district for an entire year. As so often happens elsewhere, the public relations component of the master plan gradually assumed the characteristics of the total educational master plan for the schools. Communications, public relations, information dissemination and community relations were all intricately tied up with every other aspect of the school program with relationships to curriculum, transportation, cafeteria service, building programs, budget and so forth.

Evaluating Public Relations Efforts

Evaluation of any program is essential to the effectiveness of what is attempted and planned. It is not uncommon for a school district to evaluate its public relations program only on the "product" it expects and not the process employed. And the product expected is usually evaluated in terms of what each school board member thinks public relations should be. Too often this results in the public relations program being evaluated by the number of column inches of coverage in the newspapers.

In order to evaluate a public relations or communications program properly, a school district must plan what it expects to accomplish with the program and decide what means will be used to meet its objectives. If it decided that the profile of the school district is to be raised in the community, a program should be developed and provisions outlined. Consideration should be given to which means are going to be used to raise the profile – news releases, radio programs, community group meetings, public involvement in the schools, speakers' bureaus, community involvement by students and staff members, the use of local talent in the schools as well as other methods.

An evaluation of these means can be conducted before they are used and after they have been tried for a period of time. Instruments for assessing the

various aspects of public relations programs are available. Usually they are in the form of rating scales and checklists. One, "How Good Is Your District's Public Relations Program? Take This Test," written by Thomas P. Colgate, appeared in *The American School Board Journal* in April, 1970. Also, the National School Public Relations Association's booklet, *Evaluation Instrument for Educational Public Relations Programs,* can be helpful in evaluating the means and products of a public relations program. It provides specific suggestions, guidelines and benchmarks for various areas of the communications undertaking.

In appraising the results of a public relations program, many school board members form an evaluation on the basis of limited personal experiences and impressions. Others evaluate the program on the number of brochures printed, the newsletters sent to the community, radio programs aired, and the other one-way methods of communicating with various publics. What is not evaluated is whether these processes communicated and what effect they had on the people who received the information they contained.

There are a number of ways of evaluating the products of a school district communications program. Among them are telephone surveys, records, the panel technique, questionnaires, and opinion polls.

One of the more inexpensive and faster methods of evaluating the public relations program is through a telephone survey. A number of questions can be developed concerning the readership of school publications, thoughts about the school district, how the public gets information about the schools, what they would like more information about, and reaction to radio and television programs.

In the panel technique (also called the Key Communicator Technique – see page 31) a group of laymen in the community is selected to monitor the community and to react to the information related to the community by the school district. From time to time the school district meets with this group to get a feel for the effectiveness of its public relations program.

A questionnaire with well-developed questions may be distributed at a public meeting, enclosed in a school newsletter, or sent through the mail to get feedback from the community. Information that will enable the district to make better judgments about its public relations program can be gathered by a public opinion poll. A personal interview of a scientifically selected sample of the community or voters can provide a school district with reasonably accurate information on issues and problems addressed by the public relations program. All of these methods are discussed in more detail elsewhere in this book.

Although using evaluation materials prepared by others can be helpful, it must always be remembered that the people who can know the overall worth of your communications program are the people working with it and affected by it.

YELLOW PAGES

In the past few years many excellent books and materials have been developed in the field of school public relations. These can be extremely helpful to school officials starting or improving their communications efforts.

Very useful, too, is knowing where to get help for certain public relations efforts. For example, a school district wanting to conduct a survey can get information here about an excellent book written just for that purpose. A district seeking a person specifically prepared to serve as a public relations director will find a list of colleges preparing people in this field.

The bibliography and other lists are not intended to be inclusive. Instead, these Yellow Pages are designed to provide sufficient information and sources to allow busy school officials the kind of information needed as quickly and as practically as possible.

Basic Books

The following basic books can be used as a library in the field of school public relations. They try to treat almost all aspects of the field and would be generally helpful to school management team members.

SCHOOL COMMUNICATIONS IDEAS THAT WORK: A PUBLIC RELATIONS HANDBOOK FOR SCHOOL OFFICIALS. *A practical up-to-date, how-to-do-it book that gets right to the point; light on theory.* Don Bagin, Frank Grazian, Charles Harrison. McGraw-Hill Publications, 230 W. Monroe, Chicago. 1972.

PUBLIC RELATIONS FOR PUBLIC SCHOOLS. *A basic text in the field of school public relations that provides answers to up-to-date problems.* Doyle Bortner. General Learning Press, 250 James St., Morristown, N.J. 1972.

SCHOOL-COMMUNITY RELATIONS: A NEW APPROACH. *A textbook offering theoretical and practical ideas.* Merle Sumption and Yvonne Engstrom. McGraw-Hill Book Co., New York. 1967.

THE SCHOOL AND THE COMMUNITY. *An encompassing text that includes public relations from the management team approach; theory and practical ideas.* Leslie Kindred, Don Bagin and Don Gallagher. Prentice Hall, Englewood Cliffs, N.J. 1975.

SCHOOL PUBLIC RELATIONS. *A classic text in the field.* Leslie Kindred. Prentice-Hall, Englewood Cliffs, N.J. 1957.

EDUCATION AND PUBLIC UNDERSTANDING. *One of the early texts in the field; includes a solid section on communications theory.* Gordon McCloskey. Harper & Row, New York. 1959.

UNDERSTANDING COMMUNITIES. *An excellent book to feel the pulse of the community and understand ways of gaining community support.* James Conway, Robert Jennings, Mike Milstein. Prentice-Hall, Englewood Cliffs, N.J. 1974.

Books on Special Topics

Publications

ALL ABOUT SCHOOLS. *A solid source of information on how to prepare effective school publications.* National School Public Relations Association, 1801 N. Moore St., Arlington, Va.

School Finance Elections

BUDGETS, BONDS AND BALLOTS. Philip Piele, John Stuart Hall. Lexington Books, Heath and Co., Lexington, Mass. 1973.

HOW TO GAIN PUBLIC SUPPORT FOR YOUR SCHOOL'S BUDGET AND BOND ISSUE. Don Bagin and Dave Lefever. Glassboro State College Press, Glassboro, N.J. 1971.

THE CAMPAIGN PLANNER. National School Public Relations Association, 1801 N. Moore St., Arlington, Va.

Advisory Committees

CITIZENS ADVISORY COMMITTEES. National School Public Relations Association, 1801 N. Moore St., Arlington, Va.

School Surveys

HOW TO CONDUCT LOW COST SURVEYS. National School Public Relations Association, 1801 N. Moore St., Arlington, Va.

Evaluation

EVALUATION INSTRUMENT FOR EDUCATIONAL PUBLIC RELATIONS PROGRAMS. National School Public Relations Association, 1801 N. Moore St., Arlington, Va.

PR for School Secretaries

WE CARE. Steve Carlsen. School Management Institute, Columbus, Ohio.

Audiovisual Materials

Audiovisual materials often are helpful to increase interest in inservice programs in public relations. Listed here are some recently developed materials that serve as useful catalysts for discussion and involvement.

ELEMENTARY SCHOOL PUBLIC RELATIONS TOOL KIT. *This provides a workbook for workshop participants and a flimstrip-tape that encourages audience involvement to localize needs.* National School Public Relations Association, 1801 N. Moore St., Arlington, Va.

SECONDARY SCHOOL PUBLIC RELATIONS TOOL KIT. *Same as foregoing item – only aimed at secondary school people.* Same source as foregoing item.

A SCHOOL IS PEOPLE. *Filmstrip-tape shows the role of every school employee in school public relations.* Same source as foregoing item.

BETTER PARENT-TEACHER CONFERENCES. *Two filmstrip-tape presentations – one aimed at teachers, one at parents.* Same source as foregoing item.

COMMUNICATIONS SURVIVAL KIT. *A filmstrip-tape and list of effective PR ideas for guidance counselors.* Shirley Williamson and Bill Braden. Kentucky Department of Education, Division of Guidance Services, Frankfort, Ky.

Periodicals

TRENDS. *A monthly publication of the National School Public Relations Association. It provides national trends in school PR and offers successful PR ideas.* National School Public Relations Asssociation, 1801 N. Moore St., Arlington, Va.

EDUCATIONAL PRESS ASSOCIATION NEWSLETTER. *Contains useful information about education writing.* Educational Press Association of America, Communications Department, Glassboro State College, Glassboro, N.J.

Where to Find People Prepared in School Public Relations

A limited number of institutions of higher education specifically prepare people for careers in educational public relations. Five such institutions are:

Ball State University, Muncie, Ind.
Glassboro State College, Glassboro, N.J.
Kent State University, Kent, Ohio
Northern Illinois University, DeKalb, Ill.
Texas A&M, College Station, Tex.